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ABSTRACT

Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech is presented in this paper and shown to be an effective vehicle for helping students discover the power of language and of literature. The paper first discusses the potentially destructive way English teachers sometimes tell students about "hidden meanings" in long and complex works and suggests that, to interest students in semantics, teachers should begin modestly. It then presents a witness's account of Sojourner Truth's speech, made in response to speeches by several ministers who opposed women's demands for suffrage, and shows ways that the speech can be discussed with students. It demonstrates how teachers can elicit meanings for the word "little" as used by Sojourner Truth in disputing the word of "dat little man in black dar" and how they can draw attention to the influence of Sojourner's speech upon her audience, to show students the power of words. (GW)

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SEMANTICS AND SOJOURNER TRUTH

The most destructive action that we teachers of English can perform is to allow coercion to replace education--in its radical sense: the drawing out from students their own fascination with language--when we do what we call "teaching literature." In other words, worse than boring them is the "turning off" of our students to what is most wonderful about literature.

What is most wonderful is--or is intimately related to--what linguists have labeled "semantics." By its nature, literature is rich in meaning and in meanings and, no matter what term we use while teaching, the meaning and the meanings in a verbal work of art constitute its semantics. In classes, the potentially destructive problem arises when we try to stimulate in our students a precocious appreciation of literary masterpieces and, in our attempts, pretty much tell our students about the "true meanings" of those literary works. Or: "Here is Moby-Dick, class, and what it really means is that Ahab stands for unwavering, irrational volition, Starbuck for piety and common-sense courage, Stubb for 'the unexamined life,' and Ishmael for . . ." what? (It does not matter what, nor does it matter if Moby Dick himself is an ecology rebelling against stupid human exploitation or simply an indifferent universe.)

It is difficult enough for students to read such long and complex works; it becomes overly difficult if their teacher tells them about "hidden meanings" at the expense of clarifying just the story. I am convinced that the literal level comes first,

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especially in long and complex literary entities, and I also have good reason to believe that, if we are to interest our students in semantics at all, we should begin modestly. One such beginning is with a very short work, Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. It is so brief that students can read it in class (if they are the sort who do not do their homework), yet it is a magnificent use of language--dramatic, powerful, and poetic in the way Wordsworth must have meant when he praised the "poetry" of ordinary rustic speech. So I present you with a copy of Frances Gage's account of the masterful oratory of Sojourner Truth.[1]

The second day the work waxed warm. Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions presented. One claimed superior rights and privileges for man, on the ground of "superior intellect"; another, because of the "manhood of Christ; if God had desired the equality of woman, He would have given some token of His will through the birth, life, and death of the Saviour." Another gave us a theological view of the "sin of our first mother."

There were very few women in those days who dared to "speak in meeting"; and the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the better of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneerers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture, as they supposed, of the "strong-minded." Some of the tender-skinned friends were on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere betokened a storm. When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had scarcely lifted her head. "Don't let her speak!" gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her

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[1] At the conference I distributed copies of the entire proceedings of the 1851 Akron Woman's Rights Convention, from History of Woman Suffrage, volume 1 (Rochester NY, 1889), pp. 114-117. Here I quote only the most relevant part of the account.

feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced "Sojourner Truth," and begged the audience to keep silence for a few minutes.

The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows.

"Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin' out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout?

"Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!" And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, "And a'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power). I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear de lash as well! And a'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a'n't I a woman?

"Den day talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?" ("Intellect," whispered some one near.) "Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do wid womin's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?" And she pointed her significant finger, and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.

"Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wan't a woman! Whar did your Christ come from?" Rolling thunder couldn't have stilled that crowd, as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated, "Whar did your Christ come

> from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him." Oh, what a rebuke that was to that little man. . . . Long-continued cheering greeted this. "'Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner han't got nothin' more to say."
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> Amid roars of applause, she returned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty. . . . I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration.

As if I were in class now, I shall concentrate on only a part of the whole short piece, the part that begins with the second paragraph from the end. "Den dat little man in black dar," it begins; in that single clause is sufficient linguistic complexity to educate, at least to some degree, even the most disaffected student in that arcane literary and linguistic entity called "semantics."

To be most effective, I would begin by asking an easy question. "Notice," I would say, "that Sojourner describes the minister as 'dat little man'; <u>little</u> is a common, simple word, so my question is not hard. What does <u>little</u> mean?"

Some answers would be quick in coming. "It means small, maybe short." "Yes, good, especially since he is probably shorter than the nearly six-feet-tall woman who is speaking. At the most literal, basic, and simplest level, then, Sojourner is merely saying something about the man's physical stature, perhaps by way of singling him out by contrasting his height with hers.

"But you said 'small,' too. What does <u>small</u> mean, besides tiny or not large? What if I said 'only a <u>small</u> person would do such a cruel thing?'" This question is more difficult, but

students would respond eventually, probably saying that small and little have also to do with the size of one's spirit or mind or heart. An example can easily get the class into the desired train of thought: "We speak of large-minded persons to mean people who do not let their minds be constricted by narrow opinions or prejudices, and a big-hearted person is one who is generous and open to others." Thus a second meaning of little becomes clear: "'dat little man in black dar' is not, in Sojourner's estimation, a person with a large soul or, at least when we read her speech, we can see how little means, besides short in physical stature, small in moral stature as well."

Two meanings so far, from a single little word, and yet there is another. If your class has several black students in it, this other meaning will not be too difficult to elicit from them. If your class is composed only of whites, then you may have to teach them a bit about black American English. In Raisin in the Sun, for instance, Walter is constantly called "little Walter" and his dead father is called "big Walter." Even though the father is dead, Walter remains "little Walter" until nearly the end of the play. Well, Sojourner Truth is obviously black, and Frances Gage's transcription of her speech makes it plain that she does not speak "proper" American English, so the meaning that comes from the black dialect is also, probably, in the word little as she uses it. So: "Okay, kids, in the play Walter is not a short man nor an ungenerous one, and he is thirty-five years old; what do you think little means as it is applied to a full-grown man?" The answer, not long in coming, is that he is still considered by his mother--and his

wife--as little in comparison with his father; the live Walter has not yet reached the maturity that the dead Walter seems to have attained. Walter is, despite his height, age, and attainments of marriage and parenthood, still not really a man. He is still a "little boy." He does not have what it takes to be a real adult.

"Thus," I would say to my class, "Sojourner is subtly playing with the minister's immaturity: in a dialect he probably considers beneath him, she calls him a boy. Now, isn't <u>that</u> poetic justice? In a society where white people called all black men 'boys' as a way of degrading them--'Hey, you, boy, fetch that wood!'--the black orator quite nimbly turned the tables on the self-righteous minister, especially since the rest of her response to his argument shows that she knows the bible better than he does: 'Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him.'"

At this point, having shown that Sojourner's use of the word <u>little</u> evokes three different but related meanings, it is time to turn to the narrator of the whole incident. Frances Gage is speaking for herself, surely, but she is also speaking for the rest of those present. Her comment on what Sojourner had just done to that minister with words--and with words alone!--seems to indicate that Frances Gage, like us when we read the speech carefully, is looking down with pity upon the smallness of that clergyman: "Oh, what a rebuke that was to that little man."

Finally, I would pay some attention to the influence of Sojourner's speech upon her audience. Not the cheering crowds

and the weeping eyes, but to the largeness (which by the end of the speech has come to mean all the opposites of little) of the the old black orator. "She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over." Of course the ex-slave had strong arms--she had "bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power"--but in no way could Sojourner Truth, using only muscular power, have taken up all those other women into her arms and carried them over their difficulty. No, the words themselves, by the way they are used, make it clear that they have more than one meaning.

Here I would end my "lesson" in semantics, without even mentioning the esoteric linguistic-literary term. What happens during the remainder of the class period does not really matter because the experience of Sojourner's language has been an experience felt by the class. They--students who sneer at poetry on account of its "hidden meanings"--will have felt the power of words and have sensed the way that even a simple word, used by someone who takes care with it, can spin off a structure of semantic complexity and sheer force.

If you want, you can, in the manner of Puritan sermons, make an "application" of Sojourner's "text": "Remember, that old black woman was illiterate (she got someone else to write the 'Life of Sojourner Truth' for her), so power with language does not have a strict relation to book-learning. And remember, too, that the word so important to her refutation of the little minister's argument is a word in the vocabulary of five-year-old children." If you are so lucky to have a student say "Hey, wow, she really put down that guy"--well, there is another illustration

of how little did and does function, for what, after all, does "put down" mean?

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